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How to work effectively with the third sector

A discussion paper for public
sector organisations

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March 2018



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Participating Public Sector Organisations



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Preface

The Role of the Institute for Local Governance

The Institute for Local Governance (ILG) is a Research and Knowledge Exchange Partnership involving North East local authorities, universities, police and fire and rescue services, hosted by Durham University Business School. Founded in 2009 it serves as an intermediary 'bridging organisation' whose role is to source and secure the delivery of the research requirements of its public sector partners through the facilitation of processes of co-production between practitioners and North East university researchers.

Collaborative research with the ILG differs from conventional academic research. Partnerships between academics, policy makers and practitioners produce knowledge and understanding which is of practical use, but which garners rigorous evidence which can withstand conventional academic scrutiny. This is an iterative process which develops in a 'neutral space' where members of public sector institutions, third sector organisations, private businesses and universities can exchange ideas, learn from each other and produce innovative solutions. A cornerstone of the ILGs work is its ability to establish long-term productive and mutually beneficial relationships across all sectors to strengthen economy and society in the region.¹

ILG research topics are initiated, scoped and their purpose agreed with agencies and organisations across the region. Once a research brief has been confirmed, the ILG invites university suppliers to bid for the work through an internally organised and transparent partnership competition. The public sector partner concerned selects the successful university supplier(s). The focus of research interest is 'local governance' which embraces a wide range of policy areas, management, delivery mechanisms, and academic and professional disciplines.

Over the past decade it has secured the delivery of over 90 individual research projects involving several million Pounds by North East university academics (including 20 by ILG team members, where appropriate) in processes of collaboration and co-production with practice. It has initiated and funded the delivery of major North East region-wide studies in areas such as Scottish devolution, the impact of welfare reform, public expenditure cuts, mental health services for young people, child poverty, the impact of Brexit on rural development and supported the devolution agenda through consultation surveys and support to Combined Authorities.

In disseminating the findings, it has held over 190 workshops, seminars and conferences with over 5,300 academics and practitioners held in locations across the North East. A recent national ESRC and Local Government Association study identified the ILG as being a pioneering research and knowledge exchange intermediary.



¹ Laffin, M., Mawson, J. and Omston, C. (2014) 'Public services in a "post-democratic age" an alternative framework to network governance', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 32(4): 762-776.

1

How to work effectively with the third sector

This report summarises the main conclusions drawn from two inter-related projects with public sector bodies that were undertaken between 2015 and 2017 in North East England. The purpose of these projects, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, was to explore the dynamics of relationships between the public sector (local government and health authorities) and the third sector. The principal focus has been to explore how public-sector ‘narratives’ about the strengths and weaknesses of the third sector translate into strategic planning, collaborative working and financial investment in the third sector.

Research evidence shows that, for the most part, relationships between the public sector and third sector are generally good in North East England. But the efficacy of collaborative working can be undermined, to some extent, when members of the public sector and third sector do not share the same understanding about their organisational values and respective strengths and contributions.

The work focused on six key areas of sector interaction. These emerged as the project developed:

- Outsourcing public sector services
- Assessing the impact of interventions
- Partnership working and co-production
- Hearing the voices of the third sector
- Volunteering and building the civic core
- Building capacity in the third sector

The programme of work was not a research project. Instead, its purpose was to achieve positive impact on inter-sector relationships by drawing upon existing and emerging research evidence undertaken by the authors to test hypotheses and inform debate about how to build, secure and sustain positive relationships.

What is the ‘third sector’?

The National Audit Office (NAO) defines the third sector as follows:

“The third sector is the term used to describe the range of organisations which are neither state nor the private sector. Third sector organisations (TSOs) include small local community organisations, and large, established, national and international voluntary or charitable organisations. Some rely solely on the efforts of volunteers; others employ paid professional staff and have management structures and processes similar to those of businesses, large or small; many are registered charities whilst others operate as co-operatives, “social enterprises” or companies limited by guarantee... All share some common characteristics in the social, environmental or cultural objectives they pursue; their independence from government; and the reinvestment of surpluses for those same objectives.”

Bourne, J. (2005) *Working with the third sector*, London, National Audit Office

One key element of research evidence upon which the project was built centred on the long-standing Third Sector Trends study which began in North East England in 2008.² Around this core study, many other projects funded by the Institute for Local Governance and other agencies were established which culminated in the publication

² For full details, see Chapman, T. (2017) *Third Sector Trends in North East England 2016*, Newcastle: Community Foundation. <http://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/post/ten-years-of-third-sector-trends/>

of an evidence-based discussion paper on how public sector bodies needed to change to work successfully with the third sector.

The original discussion paper, *Keeping it Simple*³, was launched at an Institute for Local Governance seminar in Darlington in 2014, attended by over 60 representatives from the third sector and all 12 North East local authorities. This report drew on research undertaken by the authors and ILG which formed the basis for the ideas which were tested in the work reported here.

Initially, there were two ESRC-funded projects; these later merged into a single entity. The first project, *Keeping it Simple*, began in 2015 and involved six local authorities: Darlington Borough Council, Durham County Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Council, Northumberland County Council, Stockton Borough Council and Sunderland City Council. It became apparent from feedback that the work could not develop fully, however, without reference to the experience of health organisations.

In 2016 a second project, *Sharing the Responsibility*, was therefore conceived. This involved five health authorities and a seventh local authority: NHS Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust, NHS South Tees Foundation Trust, NHS Stockton and Hartlepool CCG, NHS South Tees CCG, NHS Tyne and Wear and Northumberland Mental Health Foundation Trust and an additional local authority, Redcar and Cleveland Council.

What is the purpose of this report?

The *Keeping it Simple* and *Sharing the Responsibility* projects were designed to provide a focus for evidence-based, in-depth discussions about inter-sector relationships. These discussions involved key stakeholders in public sector bodies and academic researchers.⁴ Some general principles about effective working relationships emerged from the discussions; these can be summarised under two broad headings: 'public-sector narratives *about* the third sector, and 'contrasting views *within* and *amongst* public-sector organisations about how to work with the third sector'.

Public-sector narratives 'about' the third sector

In a subsequent section of this report, an overview is provided of the structure and dynamics of the third sector which will be drawn upon throughout the document. Before that is presented, however, it is useful to outline some of the principal reasons why public-sector narratives about the third sector do not always chime with the views of people who run voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises.⁵

Public-sector bodies tend to share common values and approaches to policy, procedure and practice which shape ideas about what is 'possible' and 'desirable' when thinking about working with other sectors. These values and practices stem largely from the fact that they are large, complex, formal and publicly accountable organisations. Large organisations, by definition, have a complex division of labour and principles of professionalism are underpinned by shared values surrounding expertise and specialisation.

As hierarchical and bureaucratic entities there are strong imperatives to ensure that practice is, as far as possible, continuous and consistent, and that services provided are apportioned fairly and are of equivalent quality or value. Similarly, ways of rectifying complaints or correcting internal failures are embedded in organisational culture, structure and practice.

It is not, therefore, surprising that people who work in public-sector organisations such as local authorities or health organisations tend to internalise and take for granted

³ Chapman, T. and Robinson, F. (2014) *Keeping it Simple: how to work effectively with the third sector*, Durham: Institute for Local Governance. [KEEPING IT SIMPLE How to work effectively with the third sector \(October 2014\)](#); [Keeping it Simple \(Summary Report\) October 2014](#)

⁴ A full list of participants is provided in the Appendix of this report.

⁵ Fuller explanations on the following points are provided in *Keeping it Simple* (2014) *ibid*.

...many people in the third sector may feel that their organisations came to exist to tackle issues which had been ignored, neglected or even caused by the failure of big public-sector bodies.

such values and, in turn, often expect that their approaches to practice should be understood, valued and complied with when working with people in third sector organisations

The problem, of course, is that most TSOs are *not* large, formal complex organisations. Often they do not necessarily share the values that underpin the structures and functions of public sector organisations. And many people in the third sector may feel that their organisations came into existence to tackle issues which had been ignored, neglected or even caused by the failure of big public-sector bodies.

Commitment to specific issues tends to override more generalised objectives in the third sector. This is not a flaw in sector dynamics. Instead it merely reflects the strong sense of independence held by TSOs and their close focus on their mission.

These generalisations about differences in values may not be immediately obvious in inter-sector interactions – and most often interactions, as will be shown below, are quite good. But they can, all too readily, come to the surface quickly when problems occur.⁶

Contrasts ‘within’ the public-sector about how to work with the third sector

Within and amongst public-sector bodies, differences of opinion emerge on how best to work with third sector organisations. Within large complex public-sector organisations, such as a local authority or health organisation, there are differing and often competing sets of professional practices, departmental priorities and interests. Indeed, within the same organisation such interest groups may have different perspectives on how relationships with the third sector should be approached and conducted.

Using this middle-range level of analysis, it soon becomes obvious that ‘great ideas’ coming from one position of interest can quickly be challenged or undermined by another interest group that has a different perspective.⁷ Even relatively simple initiatives can quickly become mightily complicated as departments with different interests assert their position – and especially so when it comes to the allocation of people or financial resources.

Even relatively simple initiatives can quickly become mightily complicated as departments with different interests assert their position – and especially so when it comes to the allocation of people or financial resources.

Further, outward facing corporate culture and strategy of large public organisations may add additional complexity which can confound those in the third sector who want to work with them. For example, local authorities and health organisations, for reasons which may or may not be under their direct control, can engage in competitive behaviour with other public bodies. The way they operate, similarly, is shaped to a large extent by discrete local social, economic, political and cultural factors – continuity in approaches to practice is expected within public sector organisations but not necessarily between them.

Large public-sector bodies are often good at producing innovative ideas and new approaches to tackle discrete issues in response to problems that they want to put right. And as large, relatively autonomous entities, they have the resources to work out how to do things their own way. This can be confusing for third sector organisations – and especially so when they work across the boundaries of local authorities and health organisations.

⁶ See Chapman, T. Brown, J., Ford, C. and Baxter, B. (2010) ‘Trouble with champions: local public sector – third sector partnerships and the future prospects for collaborative governance in the UK’, *Policy Studies*, 30(6), pp. 613-630.

⁷ Often the ‘villains’ of the piece are cited as ‘legal services’, ‘human resource management’, ‘democratic services’ or ‘finance departments’ – all of which are concerned about maintaining formal procedures and risk avoidance.

A web of patterned interactions

Against the background of austerity and rising demand for public services, it is imperative that public-sector organisations respond effectively to challenges and change within their jurisdiction; and it is entirely right that they should have the necessary autonomy to shape service delivery to local need, and provide the necessary leadership to make this possible. But as this paper suggests, more room should be made for interaction between organisations to encourage them to learn from each other (but without making unrealistic demands on them to share resources or do things the same way).

Furthermore, in terms of interactions with the third sector, it is also important to recognise the influence other institutions play, outside of the public sector, in initiating or sustaining the activities of voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises. Private sector business and grant-making charitable trusts and foundations also play a major role in the resourcing of third sector activity.⁸

Planning for the future development of effective working relations with the third sector by public-sector organisations cannot, therefore, be accomplished in isolation. There are too many others involved to make that possible. Equally, it is not being suggested that everything must be done in partnership, because that is not always possible or desirable. However, embedding empathetic understanding of these other organisations' ambitions is beneficial to the development of complementary action.

To be empathetic requires understanding of the situation of others. The next section presents some evidence-based observations on the situation of third sector organisations in North East England which has been drawn upon in this project.

The structure and dynamics of the third sector

The Third Sector Trends study, which has been running since 2008, provides an unparalleled resource of information and insight on the structure and dynamics of the third sector in North East England. During the most recent update of this survey in 2016, consideration was given to issues of relevance to this project. Below, ten key messages from the study are presented which have a bearing on the potential for the development of positive inter-sector relationships and which it is suggested should be borne in mind by public sector organisations embarking on this agenda.

1. Is this a local sector?

Much of the third sector is rooted in its communities - but not all of it. A third of TSOs work solely at the neighbourhood or village level and 63% work within the boundaries of one local authority. But more than a third work across local authority boundaries and these organisations tend to be larger and the most likely to engage in service delivery under public sector contract.

Amongst TSOs working mainly in inner-city areas, 52% are smaller organisations (with income below £50,000). Nearly 80% of organisations and groups which work mainly in rural areas are small TSOs. TSOs which work in urban (or a mix of urban and rural areas) are more likely to be medium sized or larger organisations.

In North East England the majority of TSOs 'strongly agree' (56%) or 'agree' (32%) that they devote most of their time helping the *local* area where they are based. Furthermore, 31% 'strongly agree' and 41% 'agree' that they want to influence *local* decision makers in the public sector so that more is achieved in their area.

⁸ Towards the end of this project, several charitable trusts and foundations became involved in the debates about strengthening the contribution of the third sector. See Appendix for details.

2. A diverse sector?

Third sector organisations come in many sizes, have different legal forms, have individualistic practice preferences, work in a variety of locations, and serve many beneficiary groups. Furthermore, most TSOs are ambitious to achieve a great deal, but usually want to do this their own way; so competition for resources is fierce.

Competition over resources of influence, people and money to maintain discrete areas of activity means that the third sector cannot be expected to define or agree on strategic priorities in the areas where they work. But they do have a wealth of insights to inform debates on such priorities.

3. TSOs work in different ways

Third sector organisations may differ in many respects, but similarities can be discerned in terms of culture and practice.

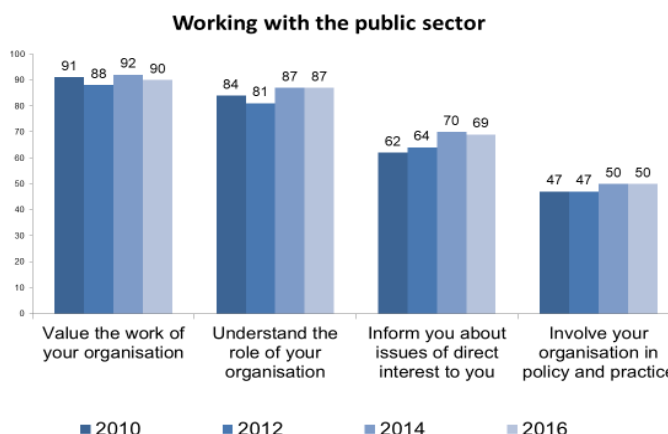
- Small organisations (defined in the Third Sector Trends Survey as organisations with annual income below £50,000) rarely employ staff and therefore operate quite informally in terms of their policies and practices – they mainly operate at a local level, but not exclusively so. They are usually completely reliant on voluntarily given time to sustain their activity.
- Medium sized TSOs (with income between £50,000 and £250,000) adopt semi-formal practices. They tend to employ people but there is little scope for a complex division of labour or occupational specialisation. Often, they are the ‘embodiment’ of their leaders in cultural and value terms. While they are ambitious to achieve a great deal, they rely mainly on grants to keep going and most have limited or no interest in delivering public sector contracts: only 16% of them have contracts.
- Larger TSOs (which have income above £250,000) are more formal in their structures and culture because their scale allows for specialisation and a more complex division of labour. They are more hierarchical and bureaucratic in structure (especially those with income over £1m) and often operate in a ‘business-like’ way. While more of these TSOs engage in the delivery of contracts for public sector organisations, a majority do not (54%).

4. Relationships with the public sector

Relationships with the public sector have improved slightly since 2010 which is perhaps surprising given the pressures local authorities and health organisations have been under since the implementation of austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis.

The majority of TSOs which have an association with public sector bodies feel positive about their relationships (89%) and most feel respected by public sector officers (86%).

Over two thirds of TSOs think that they are well informed by the public sector on issues of relevance to them (rising to 76% of larger TSOs). However, only just over a half of TSOs think that they are involved appropriately in developing and implementing policy (46% of small and 63% of larger TSOs); similar percentages of TSOs feel that public sector bodies act upon their opinions and responses to consultation.



5. *The public sector has a major influence over some TSOs*

About 28% of TSOs in North East England are primarily dependent upon public sector resources to maintain their activities (13% are mainly dependent on private sector business and 58% depend on community sector resources). Some TSOs share aspects of public sector ethos and plan and practice their work in a similar way (13%) but the majority do not.

In terms of their 'value systems' only 7% of TSOs feel that their ethos is more similar to people in the public sector. Even amongst TSOs which are bidding for or delivering public sector contracts, only 37% share a similar practice ethos to public sector officers. These are key issues which need to be understood by the public sector in devising local procurement strategies and other forms of partnership engagement.

6. *Where does TSOs' money come from?*

There has been a lot of talk over the years about public sector contracts 'being the only game in town' for the third sector. But this is not true. As indicated above, few TSOs deliver contracts. Even amongst those larger TSOs which do contracts, there has been a progressive shift back towards reliance on grant funding over the last ten years.

Dependence on grants and contracts are now level pegging for these larger organisations. A clear majority of medium and small TSOs depend primarily upon grants for funding – most of which comes from grant-making charitable trusts and foundations and the Lottery.

That stated, success rates in winning grants from local public-sector organisation sources tend to be high (about 85% of TSOs, irrespective of size, which applied had at least one successful application in the last two years). These figures suggest the need for caution when public sector organisations seek to encourage the sector to move towards sustainability and commercial viability (see also points 9 and 10).

7. *Relationships with the private sector*

The relationships between the third sector and business have rarely been researched apart from studies of major corporate social responsibility programmes and funding channelled via charitable trusts and foundations (which is not included in the statistics below).

Third Sector Trends data in 2016 reveals that TSOs have a stronger relationship with business than may have been expected. 57% of TSOs received some money from business in the last two years although only 13%

are reliant mainly on money from business. 43% of TSOs were offered the use of free facilities from businesses.⁹

Many TSOs access *pro bono* support from people in business, especially the larger TSOs (43%). While little is yet known about how such relationships are built with business, some TSOs have ambitions to cement closer relationships with business (just 13% of small TSOs compared with 39% of larger TSOs).

8. Third sector organisations work together to ‘add value’

Despite the intense competition for resources, most TSOs report that they have good informal relationships with other organisations and groups within the third sector. Only 11% of the sector is constituted of ‘rugged independents’ which will only work alone and a further 11% which only have light informal relationships with other TSOs.

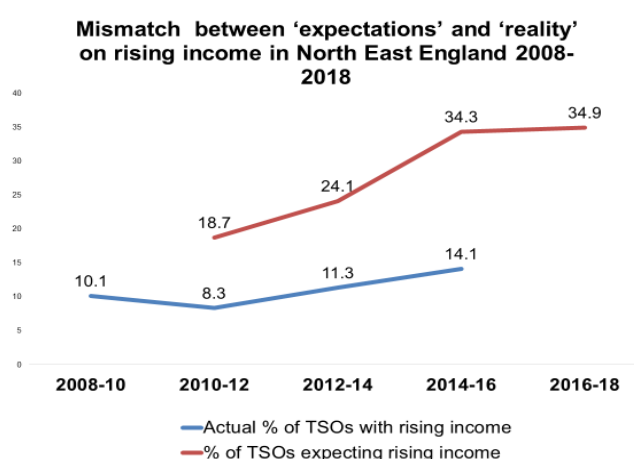
About 40% of TSOs work closely but not formally with others in the third sector, while 37% have formal working relationships (including 18% which work in formal partnerships). Larger, more formal TSOs are the most likely to work together formally and may be able to work in partnership to deliver service contracts.

Most medium sized and almost all small TSOs have little or no interest in working together in such ways. The nature and complexity of these relationships need to be understood when the public sector asks TSOs to work in partnership or consortia to ‘scale up’ the volume and impact of their work.

9. The third sector is under financial pressure, but...

National statistics on third sector finances show that income has remained quite stable over the last ten years¹⁰ – although public-sector funding dipped following the aftermath of the financial crash of 2010. In North East England, sector income has also held up well, but it rarely ‘feels’ that way to individual TSOs which face regular income fluctuations. Furthermore, those with relatively stable income (the majority of organisations) feel that they are having to work harder to stand still.

Third sector income has held up well, but it rarely ‘feels’ that way to individual TSOs which face regular income fluctuations. Even those with relatively stable income feel that they are having to work harder to stand still.



It is recognised that there is a constant ‘churn’ of winners and losers (but few closures), though it should be noted that feelings of pressure are strongly affected by laudable but exaggerated sector expectations about future income. The increasing financial pressures bearing down on the ability of

⁹ Chapman, T. and Hunter, J. (2018) *The value of business to the third sector in the north: a briefing paper from the Third Sector Trends survey*, Manchester: IPPR North.

¹⁰ NCVO Almanac 2017: <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/category/almanac/voluntary-sector/income/>

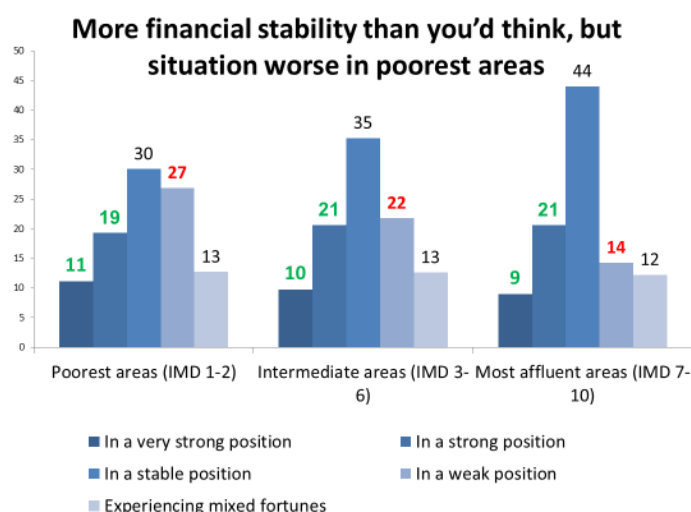
public sector organisations to deliver their services may mean that they will have to withdraw altogether in some policy areas.

Third Sector Trends data demonstrate a growing mismatch since 2008 between expectations about future income and reality. In 2010, 19% of TSOs expected income to rise over the next two years (only 8% achieved this). In 2014, 34% of TSOs expected income to rise over the next two years, but only 14% achieved their ambition – a gap of 20% between expectation and reality. High expectations produce real disappointments for many TSOs which may negatively impact on sector perceptions about their financial wellbeing.

10. Some TSOs are faring better than others

While the financial wellbeing of the third sector in the North East appears stronger than some might think, and many TSOs are enjoying considerable success in this respect, it is clear that some TSOs are under greater pressure than others.

Using a financial vulnerability indicator which combines three factors (over the last two years such TSOs have experienced falling numbers of employees, have used reserves for essential costs and had significantly declining income) it is evident that 27% of TSOs in the poorest areas¹¹ were struggling compared with just 14% in the richest areas of the North East.



Similarly, 31% of TSOs which relied primarily on public sector funding were struggling compared with just 17% mainly funded by the community sector. The interaction between these two factors is strong because more TSOs in the poorest areas are more dependent on public sector funding.

¹¹ Based in the two poorest deciles of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, while the more affluent areas are the 7th to 10th deciles.

Summary and next steps

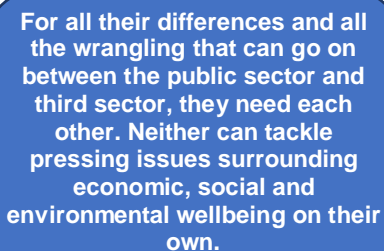
In the sections that follow, further data is introduced to address more specific issues surrounding the six areas of interaction we are exploring in this project. The key messages are, firstly, that the third sector is a resilient entity, despite the inevitable political and financial ups and downs it faces over time. But secondly, that it cannot be taken for granted that individual TSOs will, come what may, find a way to keep going.

We think it is useful to bear in mind that the public sector and third sector, for all their differences and all the wrangling that can go on, need each other. Neither can tackle pressing issues surrounding economic, social and environmental wellbeing on their own.

The ten points presented above on the current situation provides a backdrop for the six case studies that will follow on how public sector organisations engage with the third sector.

Much of what follows may come across as provocative. We hope, though, that readers of this discussion paper will recognise that the point of the exercise is to make an impact by encouraging people to take a fresh look at their relationships with the third sector (and vice versa) – even if they do not agree with everything we say. We could have written it differently, guarding against accusations of assertion by evidencing every statement. But this would make it a dry read and perhaps discourage people from reading it at all.

On occasion, we do provide references to published work where detailed evidence is available for closer scrutiny. But often we can't do that when drawing upon the insights gained from this consultation exercise for ethical reasons. Many people have been generous and candid in their exchanges with us and with each other. So we have a duty not to divulge everything that has informed our thinking and helped us to reach broad conclusions.



For all their differences and all the wrangling that can go on between the public sector and third sector, they need each other. Neither can tackle pressing issues surrounding economic, social and environmental wellbeing on their own.

2

Outsourcing public sector services

Where are we now?

Most of the third sector has little or no interest in the idea of delivering public services on behalf of public sector organisations. Furthermore, there is no evidence to show that attitudes have changed significantly over the last ten years (see chart below).

Trends in sector participation in the delivery of public sector services under contract (North East England and Cumbria, 2016)		2008-10	2010-12	2012-14	2014-16
We are not aware of these opportunities		26.8	20.9	16.4	20.5
We are aware of these opportunities, but they are not relevant to our organisation's objectives		44.1	52.5	47.5	46.8
Perceptions of barriers	We are aware of these opportunities but need more information	4.3	3.8	5.0	4.7
	We are interested in this option but would need extra support to do this	5.7	5.2	8.7	6.8
	We are interested in this option but feel there are barriers in the tendering process	5.5	6.2	6.6	7.1
We are already bidding to deliver public sector services		4.2	4.0	3.7	3.6
We are already delivering public sector services for which we have tendered		9.4	7.4	12.2	10.5
N=		787	1,435	1,083	1,320

The propensity of TSOs to engage in bidding for contracts and delivering services is shaped to a large extent by their interest in developing capacity and capability to deliver such services.¹²

- Only 3% of smaller TSOs are involved with bidding for or delivering contracts: 28% are unaware of such opportunities and 57% state that such work is not relevant to their objectives. 11% have some interest in the idea but identify barriers to getting involved.
- Medium sized TSOs tend to identify barriers to them getting involved in the delivery of contracts (36%) or state that this is contrary to their mission (37%). Only 16% bid for or are delivering contracts.
- Larger TSOs are the most likely to be delivering or bidding for contracts (46%), but it is of note that 20% of TSOs state that such work is contrary to their mission or that they perceive barriers to doing such work (27%).

Some TSOs – particularly the larger ones – have always worked closely with the public sector and have long experience of being contracted to provide services. The public sector has relied on TSOs to provide services in social and domiciliary care, for example. TSOs, at their best, can be efficient and effective, reaching into communities, and also mobilising the contribution of volunteers.

In recent decades there has been increasing pressure to contract-out ('outsource') public sector services as budgets have reduced. Outsourcing has been seen as a way of reducing public expenditure – but also seen as a way of making services potentially more accessible to local communities, more responsive and more flexible. However, with a 40% reduction in central government funding to local authorities since 2010,

¹² Data from *Third Sector Trends in North East England* (2016), *ibid*, pp 46-7.

and increasing criticism of outsourcing to larger private sector organisations which sometimes engage third sector organisations, this trend may slow down in future years.

Public sector organisations now have a better understanding of the difficulties that can arise from outsourcing to TSOs. One problem can be the complexity and cost of having contracts with many small TSOs, and some have tried to deal with that by encouraging the development of consortia, with a lead organisation taking responsibility for overseeing the work of small subcontracted TSOs. However, that can bring tensions within the consortium and problems with effectively controlling delivery.

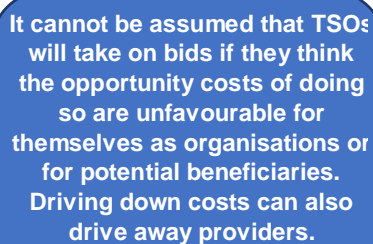
Outsourcing has probably not developed as much as might have been expected. Both the public sector and the third sector have found that it is not necessarily straightforward. It can work well; but it can also be fraught with difficulty.

Why don't things always work out as planned?

Some public sector organisations make the mistake of assuming that most TSOs are keen to take on the delivery of services previously undertaken by public sector organisations. In fact, many TSOs don't for various reasons. They may lack the scale, capacity and know-how - and they may be wary (of TUPE issues, for instance). Some TSOs may not want to do the things that public sector organisations want to be done, or do not want to have to meet the contractual requirements set by the public sector. Some TSOs feel that the public sector isn't interested in them and won't treat them with respect, so getting involved in contracting would be a frustrating experience.

TSOs are independent organisations. They have developed their own cultures and ways of working, sometimes in response to the limitations of public sector provision. Evidence shows that tensions may arise: TSOs need the income that a contract may offer but can struggle with the consequences. Those consequences can include not just being constrained by the contractual requirements, but also having to address delivery within tight budgets. Things can go right, of course – and often do. But when they go wrong, the result can be difficult; contracts can break down and may even be handed back by the TSO, with recriminations all round.

It cannot be assumed that TSOs will take on bids if they think the opportunity costs of doing so are unfavourable for themselves as organisations or for potential beneficiaries. Driving down costs can and does drive away providers.



It cannot be assumed that TSOs will take on bids if they think the opportunity costs of doing so are unfavourable for themselves as organisations or for potential beneficiaries. Driving down costs can also drive away providers.

What role should public authorities play in the process?

The findings of this project have highlighted the key to good outsourcing - that works for both purchaser and provider - is a relationship based on trust and respect. The nature and quality of the relationship is of crucial importance.

Public sector organisations need to understand the outlook, motives and capacities of TSOs. The public sector must respect the independence of TSOs and develop understanding of their position: how *they* see the opportunities and the pitfalls associated with bidding for a contract.

Most TSOs would hope for something more than just a commercial relationship. They want the public sector to appreciate the value of contracting with the TSO *because* it's a TSO. They hope that the public sector organisation would expect a relationship that is about more than basic delivery of the contract and that the public sector would understand that a TSO is not interested only in the 'bottom line'.

One TSO said that it was disappointing that its contractual relationship with a local authority was that of 'master and servant'; the TSO had supposed that the local authority would recognise the value added it brought as a TSO and would also be interested in helping to resolve the problems it was having in an existing service delivery contract.

TSOs are often - and justifiably - worried about risks. Taking on a contract can bring substantial risks in relation to financial consequences if a contract is under-priced, and reputational damage if targets are not met or a project fails. TSOs, particularly smaller ones, stress that they cannot cover loss-leading projects or undertake 'at risk' work in the hope of winning a contract.

It can be tempting to offload risk onto TSOs. Our research suggests that setting unachievable targets within an under-priced contract is likely to lead to service failures and may even bring down TSOs. Ultimately, it makes no sense to offload risk onto TSOs.

Public sector organisations can play a leadership role in encouraging TSOs to deliver better services through contracts, but leadership needs to be exercised carefully, given the dangers of imposition. There are dangers, too, in public sector organisations trying to build consortia. Experience suggests that 'partnerships' that are put together through intervention outside the third sector for the purpose of bidding for contracts are less likely to deliver well or prove durable.

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

More often than not, public sector bodies do develop good relationships with TSOs – and they need to if they are to outsource successfully. One ingredient of successful partnerships is consistency. Ideally, TSOs should be able to understand what local public sector organisations want and expect from them – and that should be consistent over time and across the public sector organisation. An important issue is the maintenance of key personnel.

TSOs often want and need an individual contact in the public sector organisation – someone they know and trust at the right level in the organisation (usually the relevant level would be operational, on the ground, rather than high level strategic connections). That trust should ideally mean there can be candid discussions about problems, hopes and fears – on both sides.

TSOs point out that they have limited capacity to keep developing new personal relationships when there are continual staff changes. High staff turnover in public sector organisations make it difficult to develop and sustain deep and trusting relationships. It generally helps if there is an established and shared history forming the foundation of these relationships.

Public sector organisations can realistically aim for mutually supportive relationships with a number of TSOs in their area of operation. They can also aim for good dialogue with the sector about future developments, concerns and possibilities. That requires effort to get to know the local third sector landscape (as highlighted in Section 1) concerning its structure and dynamics. A realistic aim – though not easy to achieve – is mutual respect, but there will always be some differences in culture and, particularly, scale between the public and third sectors.

The public sector may see advantages in scaling up the third sector, building interconnections, or changing cultures – but such changes are probably best left at the level of encouragement, certainly not imposition.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

Public sector organisations need to think carefully before outsourcing. It may be that outsourcing is not the solution if it doesn't save money or bring other benefits such as quality of service or accessibility or is simply too risky (if failures could threaten the safety of vulnerable people, for example). In these cases, the public sector needs to retain in-house services.

Drawing on some of the case studies we have undertaken, the public sector may be well-advised to do nothing in relation to the shape and character of the third sector. Enforced consortia, for example, can bring more trouble than they are worth. The public sector may see advantages in scaling up the third sector, building interconnections, or changing cultures – but such changes are probably best left at the level of encouragement, certainly not imposition.

3

Assessing the impact of interventions

Where are we now?

The idea of impact assessment is now well-established – but that doesn't mean it is done well, or appropriately, or meaningfully. Practitioners in both public and third sectors invariably state that it is an inexact 'science', often done badly and as a tick-box exercise.

Relatively few TSOs would assess impact of their own accord, but instead generally do this only if it is a requirement of funders. Small TSOs do practically nothing in this regard because they neither have the resource, expertise or reason to do so. But even amongst the larger TSOs with income over £250,000 a year, only 36% do surveys with beneficiaries, 22% do focus groups and 41% do individual discussions.¹³

Assessment of impact at an organisational level is even more limited: just 4% of the largest TSOs do social audits.

Impact measurement is often included within contracting processes. When the public sector contracts with TSOs to deliver services, there can be a requirement for the TSO to include impact assessment as part of the programme of implementation. Just over 50% of TSOs collect outcome data, for example, because it is required of them by funders. However, there is often little understanding (on both sides) of impact assessment, how it is done, and what it is for.

After a period during which impact assessment has gained ground, there is now increasing debate and some scepticism about its value (one of our participants referred to the emergence of 'impact heretics'). It is not argued here, though, that there is a case for abandoning impact assessment. It is a matter of doing it where it is appropriate and then ensuring that it is done well.

There may be little understanding (on both sides) of impact assessment, how it is done, and what it is for.

Why don't things always work out as planned?

Impact assessment can be problematic at every stage of the process. There can be difficulties determining and agreeing what impacts are sought or intended. There may be a desire to identify impacts which are simply not realistic or attainable in relation to the intervention. Unrealistic impact targets may be set in funding bids and contract proposals – when the focus is on being successful at securing the funding rather than on the realities of successfully undertaking evaluation and impact.

Some impact measures may be poorly specified or, in any case, simply not measurable. On the other hand, there can be an inappropriate focus on what can be measured – so that becomes the impact that is wanted, instead of something more meaningful. This can lead to the situation where, in the words of one participant, 'what gets counted, counts', with the danger that the real value of a project or programme is distorted.

Sometimes it is difficult to identify potential impacts in advance – and there are unexpected or unintended impacts that have not been identified and are therefore not tracked. Some of those impacts may be considered to be positive; desirable in hindsight. But some may be negative, unwanted consequences of an intervention that go unrecorded, resulting in a failure to capture, and learn from, examples of 'failure'.

¹³ Chapman, T., Bell, V. and Robinson, F. (2011) *Measuring impact: easy to say, hard to do*, Newcastle: Northern Rock Foundation.

What role should public authorities play in the process?

In a contractual arrangement, public sector authorities will normally specify inputs and outputs, together with some impacts or outcomes. Impacts and outcomes can be difficult to specify (especially in advance) and the public sector organisation needs to recognise that – and recognise that those measures may need revision and so should be open to some subsequent renegotiation.

It is incumbent on the public sector organisation to specify impacts which are relevant, realistic and measurable. And impact measurement should not be onerous or disproportionate.

In some cases, a public sector organisation will be the largest or lead funder of an intervention being delivered by a TSO. That may give the public sector organisation a position of influence – therefore able to press for realistic impact assessment measures and measures that may meet the requirements of all the funders (rather than separate reporting of different measures to the different funders).

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

It is possible to envisage the type of features that would be characteristic of a workable impact assessment model if it is 'fit for purpose'. That would include a limited number of relevant, measurable impacts, combined with a degree of flexibility admitting the possibility of modifying the assessment method as the initiative or service would be rolled out.

In impact assessment there can be a tendency to overstate and 'glamorise' impacts. An example put to us was of a community centre getting funding for new curtains and feeling it was necessary to claim this would lead to improvements in the health of the centre's users. Down-to-earth, prosaic impacts may not be 'glamorous' but are more likely to be useful and true. Impacts may well be 'worthy but dull' rather than 'transformational'.

Our dialogue with third sector organisations has indicated a reaction to what is seen as the heavy emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, and suggestions that much of it is spurious, unhelpful, even pointless. However, resources must be allocated and choices made, based on some criteria that have at least an element of objectivity. To make impact assessment worthwhile, it should be linked to the decision making and resource allocation processes.

Ideally there needs to be a mechanism in place whereby those contracting are regularly in receipt of information on service delivery outputs and are able to assess and adapt processes accordingly with suppliers. Where projects and programmes are not achieving the desired impacts, they should be either adjusted or curtailed and resources redirected to other initiatives or policy areas.

In many economic, social and environmental policy areas where the third sector is engaged it is reasonable to aim for a 'common sense' approach to assessing impacts that links together metrics with qualitative judgements. Such an approach would not slavishly follow 'bean counting' methodologies, but recognise the difficulty of measuring certain forms of impact typically associated with third sector delivery (e.g. personal, environmental, health and other aspects of wellbeing).

It is necessary to avoid the imposition of a pseudo-scientific/technical approach¹⁴ which may fail to adequately address certain aspects of the human condition which

¹⁴ For example, when used well, a well evidenced examination of the relationship between cause and consequence can help funders to define and communicate how they want to tackle a problem and what needs to be done in practical terms to achieve a successful outcome. However, the current fashion for using 'theories of change' in impact assessment often does little more than *describe an ambition* – if these ambitions are not realistic the exercise is a pointless one. See for further

are being targeted and therefore consider alternative means of capturing the impact in consultation with likely recipients and those directly involved in delivery.

A third sector participant in our work said there had been occasions when ‘people hide behind metrics because they’re afraid of making judgements’.

A participant in our discussions said that there can be times when ‘people hide behind metrics because they’re afraid of making judgements’.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

There will be times when performance and impact measurement can get in the way of creativity. An innovative, experimental initiative should not be bogged down by bureaucracy or ‘not fit for purpose’ impact assessments. Sometimes it can be a matter of timing; an experiment may be left free to run and only later clarified and guided by an assessment framework.

A public sector funder may not necessarily be well-placed to identify likely impacts of a TSO-led intervention and there is therefore value in working with third sector organisations to establish what are the most appropriate and cost effective measures in the context of a specific service or initiative. Sometimes methods of monitoring and assessment can be best left to the TSO itself, which can then identify, track and communicate what has been achieved.

Often, and particularly in relation to ‘soft outcomes’ such as the impact of an intervention on social and individual wellbeing, evidence cannot easily be collected; and if it can, often it cannot be isolated from the impact of other factors. Just because something is hard to identify, does not mean that benefit has not been gained.

The timing of impact evaluations, usually fixed at the end of the funding period of an intervention, often comes far too soon for an effect to be identified or be confirmed. Particularly in relation to soft outcomes – impact may not fully emerge for many years and will, like as not, partly be attributed to other interventions which have come and gone in the meantime.

There is a place for informed and broadly-based judgement on whether programmes have been completed or if continuation is being discussed. Impact assessment is but one of the factors that should be considered when such decisions are being contemplated. Even good quality impact assessments on discrete interventions will not tell the whole story.

4

Partnership working and co-production

Where are we now?

The volume of interaction between public sector organisations, such as local authorities or health organisations, and the third sector is substantial: almost 90% of TSOs in the Third Sector Trends survey state that they have some kind of relationship with public sector bodies. The quality of relationships is good too. Over 80% of TSOs who have a relationship with the public sector report that they feel valued by public sector officials.

Partnership is a 'warm' word. The term evokes notions of shared interest, values, commonly held objectives and of equality of power in a relationship. Few partnerships, in any aspect of social life, fully match up to these expectations.

Partnership is a 'warm' word. The term evokes notions of shared interest, values, commonly held objectives and of equality of power in a relationship. Few partnerships, in any aspect of social life, fully match up to these expectations. The reality is that people or organisations bring different levels of power and influence to the table when they establish or join partnerships. Their values, interests and objectives vary markedly and can often be at odds with those of others.

In the context of organisational partnerships, it is likely that individual agencies will engage in a range of partnership arrangements at any one time. Furthermore, the nature of these partnerships will vary considerably. One organisation may find itself in some partnerships where they are clearly dominant over others; while in others, they may play only a small part in the scheme of things and be happy to accept a subordinate position in terms of power and influence.

Inequalities are built into most partnership arrangements. But TSOs often feel uncomfortable about this – even if they signed up to them in the full knowledge that power and influence may not be shared equally

Why don't things always work out as planned?

Public sector organisations often articulate their relationships with the third sector in partnership terms. But our project suggests that TSOs do not always think about it in the same way.

In general, TSOs feel valued by public sector bodies – but in practical terms they may feel that partnership working does not fully work in their favour. When joint ventures are established to bid for EU, government or other sources of money, for example, larger TSOs often say that they have too little influence over policy and practice decisions. Smaller TSOs feel that they are brought into partnerships to lend support to claims that a programme can reach into local communities. But often, they feel relatively powerless in the process of delivering a programme - describing themselves as little more than 'bid candy' – lending credibility to a tender but gaining little practical or financial benefit in return.

TSOs have power when they enter into partnership relationships with public sector bodies, but do not always recognise it as such. Public sector officers are bound by organisational protocol. Often, they cannot openly say what they feel. Leaders of TSOs, by contrast, are relatively unconstrained in this respect. As independent organisations, TSOs can work with whom they want and in the way that they want to. While TSOs often say that they do not have an equal voice in partnerships, the reality is that they often exercise their voice in the strongest of terms and when things are not going the way they want, they can take their argument into the public realm. This can annoy public sector officers.

When public sector officers initiate or join partnerships they often try to formulate agreements to mitigate the risk of argument or upset. In so doing they attempt to align participants to certain sets of rules or principles to ensure that things run smoothly. Based on examples, we have noted the reality may be all too different. A degree of

TSOs say that they do not have an equal voice in partnerships, but they often exercise their voice in the strongest of terms. When things are not going their way they can take their argument into the public realm.

sensitivity and flexibility on the part of public sector organisations may be necessary to achieve an effective partnership outcome.

What role should public sector authorities play in the process?

We think that the word ‘partnership’ is so broad and loose that its use produces problems that do not always need to emerge. So, in this programme of work, we have developed new ways of thinking and talking about relationships between organisations in the public sector and third sector to help make things easier.

Distinctions have been drawn between four different types of partnership relationships at a conceptual level to help public sector organisations think more clearly about what kind of roles they are playing and what they might expect of others who participate in such relationships.¹⁵

- **Contractual relationships:** where public sector bodies purchase services from third sector providers. Such relationships are often described in partnership terms, but the reality is that they are not (for more discussion, see Section 2). In a contract, the buyer builds in clauses for recourse if TSOs fail to deliver
- **Formal partnership relationships:** where agencies from the same or different sectors work together in a formally constituted relationship to deliver specific outcomes, usually on a time-limited basis. In such partnerships there may well be a lead or prime partner which holds and distributes the budget to other organisations or agencies and/or acts as an accountable body for the funder. Holding the purse strings is a powerful tool in shaping the way partnership arrangements manifest themselves.
- **Complementary relationships:** where agencies and organisations from the same or different sectors work towards similar objectives but without formal binding or contractual ties. A range of partners may bring money to the table, but rarely, and for good reason, will they agree to ‘pool’ such resources. The terms of reference of the partnership may be defined in more or less formal ways. Such relationships are less likely to be time limited and can allow for participating organisations to step in or step out during the life of the partnership.
- **Autonomous working:** where organisations or agencies work towards a social or economic outcome individually or collectively – and can often share common values or objectives. These can further be divided into two categories:
 - **Good neighbours:** where organisations are empathetic towards and respectful of the contribution of other organisations and agencies and do not purposefully duplicate or undermine the efforts of others. Generosity of spirit is required – but within limits, since some reciprocity is expected.
 - **Poor neighbours:** where organisations conflict and/or compete, intentionally or otherwise and undermine the achievement of shared objectives which all parties claim to support. Poor neighbours can be empathetic too – a dangerous tool in the wrong hands.

We think that public sector organisations need to keep these distinctions in mind when considering how they want to develop formal relationships with TSOs with a view to achieving particular objectives.

¹⁵ These categories are not mutually exclusive. Larger TSOs are likely to engage in all these kinds of relationships at any one time and feel comfortable in doing so. These definitions of levels of partnership or complementary working were first developed in the context of a study of public, private and third sector organisations working in national and cross-national contexts. See Lindsey, I. and Chapman, T. (2017) *Enhancing the Contribution of Sport to the Sustainable Development Goals*, London: Commonwealth Books, 24-28.

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

Ambitions are more easily stated than achieved. The key thing is to focus on the relevant objective to be achieved (see Section 3 on impact) and then work backwards to think about the configuration of organisations that might be assembled to attain the desired outcome.

Public sector organisations must recognise that they cannot always define fully the terms within which partnership working with the third sector operates. This is because public sector organisations rarely have sufficient resource or political leverage to make that happen. TSOs operate within the realm of civil society and as such are independent and autonomous. They can, should and will do things their own way.

Accepting the limits of power and influence over the way that partnerships with TSOs may work will actually, in our view, strengthen relationships in many contexts. And when things do not go according to plan, provides explanations for why this may have happened rather than succumbing to counter-productive responses, or worse, ‘washing their hands’ of TSOs claiming relationships are more trouble than they are worth.

Sometimes TSOs are difficult to work with for good reason - because they are right to challenge on the grounds that they have something to offer which needs to be recognised.

We caution against conflating ‘difficult relationships’ with unproductive or destructive ones. It is evident that sometimes TSOs are difficult to work with. This may be for good reason because they have expertise, local knowledge or a unique contribution to make and are therefore right to make their case. While stories will inevitably circulate within the public sector about difficult relationships with TSOs, we would argue that these are more than likely to be the exceptional rather than the rule.¹⁶

Our research suggests that for the most part TSOs work well with public sector bodies. This is because people in both sectors often share similar values about what needs to be done to achieve economic, social and community wellbeing – although approaches to effect such objectives may differ.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

Sometimes it may be better not to try to take control over the arrangements underpinning third sector collaboration and especially so when public sector bodies have insufficient leverage over partners to achieve that objective.

The desire to mitigate risk is understandable. But sometimes, the processes surrounding this can produce higher levels of risk to public sector bodies in operational or reputational terms. Such action may create unnecessary complexity or destabilise activities that are working perfectly satisfactorily.

Being a lead partner usually involves substantive resource investment in a new initiative. Money attracts potential partners ‘like bees around a honey pot’ and some TSOs may seek to join such partnerships with ulterior motives in mind. Perhaps it is better sometimes not to put resources in up front? But rather facilitate the debate, or just join the debate, without necessarily leading the development of an initiative.

¹⁶ See Chapman, T., Brown, J., Ford, C. and Baxter, E. (2010) ‘Trouble with champions: local public sector – third sector partnerships and the future prospects for collaborative governance in the UK’, *Policy Studies*, Vol. 30, No.6, pp. 613-630

5

Hearing the voices of the third sector

Where are we now?

With a view to working with the third sector in mind, public sector organisations often want to reach the third sector through ‘one door’ and have a desire to hear only ‘one voice’. That can never happen.

Public sector organisations often want to reach the third sector through ‘one door’ and have a desire to hear only ‘one voice’. That can never happen.

The third sector is a diverse entity, composed as it is of organisations of different shapes and sizes, with different structures and cultures, and holding a wide range of values, practices and purposes. The sector has many voices. And while consensus is reached from time to time from segments of the third sector, as a whole it can never be expected to speak with one voice.

Ironically, TSOs often expect the same of the public sector. Claims are made that grant application and tendering processes should be uniform across the public sector; that access to public sector officers should be simple and that when contact is made, they should sing from the same song sheet.

Public sector organisations’ structures, culture and approach to policy and practice are similar in many ways (see the introduction to this report), but as large semi-autonomous entities it is up to each of them to decide how to deal with discrete issues their own way. In policy and practice terms, even when meeting closely defined statutory obligations, differences inevitably emerge.

The public sector landscape is complex. Local authority boundaries are defined geographically, affording a measure of certainty on how things are done in particular areas. Health organisations’ boundaries are more complex, by contrast, because the jurisdictions of foundation trusts and CCGs often intersect and overlap and, furthermore, they cross the boundaries of local authorities. There are other public sector organisations and institutions to consider too: including police, fire and ambulance authorities and conglomerations of authorities such as local enterprise partnerships or combined authorities.¹⁷

Larger TSOs often work across the boundaries of public sector organisations such as health organisations or local authorities. So, building positive relationships can be complicated, confusing and can become a source of complaint.

And yet, a majority of TSOs feel that public sector organisations inform them about issues of relevance to them (59% of all TSOs and 77% of larger TSOs¹⁸). Furthermore, half of TSOs say that public sector organisations involve them in decision making in areas of policy and practice which are relevant to their organisational mission (63% of larger TSOs). So, something is going right.

Why don’t things always work out as planned?

The third sector cannot speak with one voice because it is composed of organisations which, by definition, specialise in a range of economic, social, cultural or environmental issues. As such, TSOs are constantly driven into competition with each other when they try to garner resources of ideas, people and money. As shown in the introduction to this report, they also tend to be ambitious in their objectives – which means that there is never enough resource available to meet expectations.

¹⁷ Robinson, F., Shaw, K. and Regan, S. (2017) *Who runs the North East Now?*. Durham: Institute for Local Governance; Mawson, J. (2010) ‘Social enterprise strategy: networks and regional development’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 31(1/3), 66-83.

¹⁸ These data only refer to TSOs which have a relationship with the public sector. Data from Third Sector Trends 2016, *ibid*, pp 54-7.

Many public sector organisations make strong efforts to listen to and learn from people in the third sector. This programme of work has found that there are many ways of doing this. Some local authorities invest heavily in locality-based fora to hear the voices of the third sector at grass-roots level. Some establish fora for larger TSOs which operate at a wider level or work in specialist areas of provision. Some delegate tasks to third sector infrastructure organisations which provide specialist services and a voice for a sector or geographical area on the understanding that such organisations are better placed to distil the opinions of the wider sector.

All of these approaches have advantages, but most have weaknesses too. Grass-roots level consultation can work well in many ways, but often the people who claim to represent the interests of the third sector are not fully trusted, or their expertise recognised by those they seek to serve/represent. Often, we have heard people use the term 'usual suspects' to describe people who represent sector interests on boards, committees and partnerships – although, when prompted, some critics are often unwilling to commit their own time to the service of the sector.

Many local authorities and health organisations have attempted to set up panels to talk to larger TSOs working across wider areas or in specialist contexts – but the take up has often been limited unless the activity is in some way connected with funding opportunities. Ironically, those TSOs which remain can then be accused of being too cosy with the public sector and claims are made about the lack of a 'level playing field' when it comes to influence or access to resources.

Third sector infrastructure organisations can be effective in the role of representing parts of the sector, but their access to the whole sector can be limited. They tend to serve middle sized TSOs the best while small organisations often fall under the radar and larger TSOs make their own connections. Sometimes, due to shortfalls in the income of infrastructure bodies particularly with the withdrawal of central government funding, they enter the field of delivering services themselves which often undermines their credibility amongst organisations they seek to represent and may be seen to compete with local providers.

The terrain, in short, is complex – this means that well-intentioned attempts to hear about and learn from the third sector can founder.

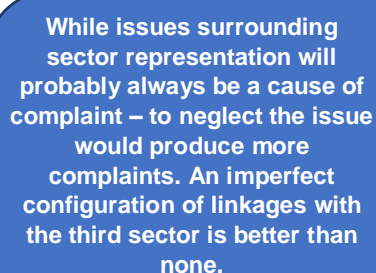
What role should public sector authorities play in the process?

The public sector cannot overcome many of the issues outlined above, no matter how much money they invest or how hard they try. But this does not mean that they should stop trying. While issues surrounding sector representation will probably always be a cause of complaint – to neglect the issue would produce more complaints. An imperfect configuration of linkages with the third sector is better than none.

Rather than focusing on the big picture of the third sector 'as a whole', we think many local authorities and health organisations have it about right when they focus attention on areas of specific interest to themselves rather than trying to second-guess what the third sector needs. The key point is to recognise this, rather than imagining something else.

Where they have been established, local area partnerships seem to work well as do specialist fora for larger organisations when there is a genuine interest to make this work on *both* sides. The efficacy of such initiatives depends, often, on the support of a range of stakeholders in the public sector including executives with a strategic brief, officers working at an operational level and elected Members. Spatial and economic configuration of areas under public sector jurisdiction also makes a difference - some areas lend themselves to community representation better than others.

Investing in third sector infrastructure to delegate activity can be a good way forward if the infrastructure body can demonstrate its willingness and effectiveness to deliver what is required. But in some areas, this is difficult where several organisations



While issues surrounding sector representation will probably always be a cause of complaint – to neglect the issue would produce more complaints. An imperfect configuration of linkages with the third sector is better than none.

compete to represent sector interests and cannot be relied upon to work well with each other.

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

When addressing the question of why public sector bodies want to engage with the third sector, responses can be quite muddled. There is room, we think, for clarification in this respect. Motives include:

- Informing the public sector on community needs – the third sector can provide many insights on such matters, but they may be less effective on ‘prioritising’ needs given that organisations’ viewpoints inevitably derive from positions of interest.
- Deciding how to tackle identified priorities in commissioning processes – TSOs are experienced in many fields of work and will have positive and useful things to say about approaches to practice. There are risks of conflicts of interest, however, if TSOs promote the development of approaches to practice which they have an interest in delivering.
- Engaging with the third sector in developing new initiatives – co-production and partnership working with TSOs are appealing ideas. Charitable foundations may also have an interest and potential role to play. Separating the social and community benefit of interventions from organisational contributions can be difficult.
- Investing in third sector intelligence so that representative voices can be heard – many claims have been made that the third sector is the best placed to garner intelligence about its own activities. If that is true, it is conditional upon the TSO leading the process being able to demonstrate that their reach into the sector is as good as they claim.

Formal boards and committees can often produce defensive and combative behaviours – resembling interrogation or jousting. Where and how conversations take place are issues worth thinking about.

Getting people to talk openly and honestly about policy and practice is sometimes hard to do. Thought always needs to be given to the environment within which such discussions take place. There may be a case to hold discussions on ‘neutral’ territory so that TSOs do not feel like they are being ‘brought in’ to hear their views.

The use of formal committees or boards as locations for horizon scanning or throwing around new ideas may not always work too well. Formal boards and committees can often produce defensive and combative behaviours – meaning that exchanges can resemble interrogation or jousting. Where and how conversations take place are issues worth thinking about.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

It is worthwhile to reiterate some points we have already made in this report to drive home the argument that it is not possible to enjoy a sense of communion within or between sectors – there will always be differences of interest and values which will produce argument, rancour, complaint – and sometimes uncomfortable silences.

Public sector organisations cannot expect to manage relationships with the third sector in a neat and tidy way. Finding mechanisms to ameliorate the risk of conflict with and complaint from the third sector, or to rectify issues in an orderly way are things that public sector bodies often focus upon. The third sector is generally quite critical or dismissive about public sector protocols and organisational rigidities – often, they tell us, ‘things would be better if they were more like us’.

Our findings suggest that just because consultation and conversation can be difficult is not a good reason to stop the conversation. Making decisions behind closed doors which second guess how the third sector will react rarely works well. Keeping decisions under wraps for too long, so that the third sector has too little time to

marshal its thoughts when initiatives are announced and consultation is called, is not a recipe for good inter-sector relationships.

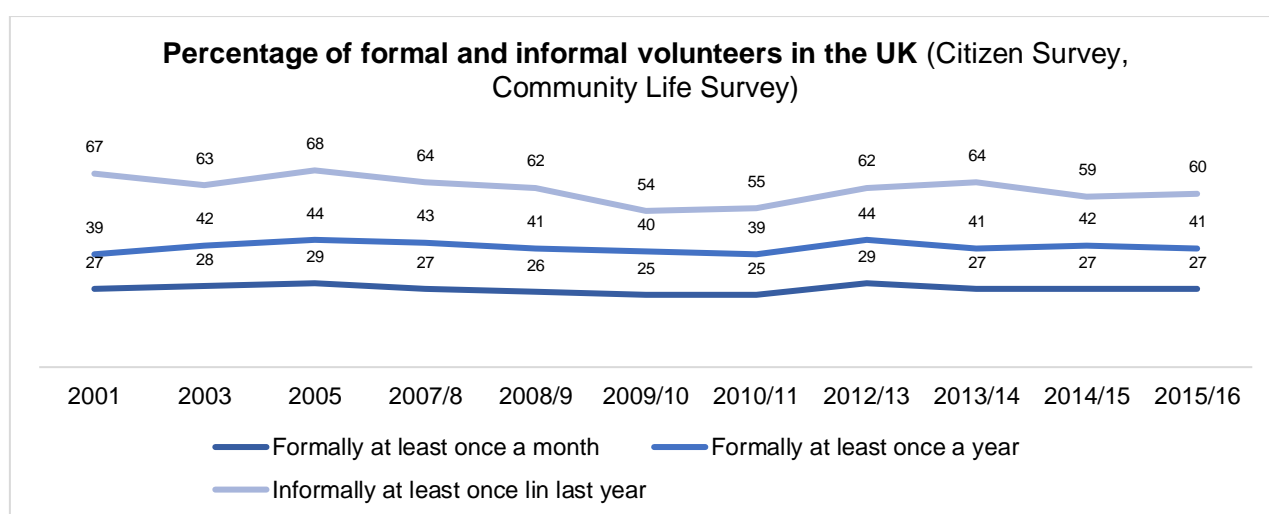
Systematic responses to complex issues have a mixed history of success. It is hard to ask public authorities to 'relax' their own standards which are shaped by their statutory commitments and public accountability. It is useful to take things in stages – to draw a distinction between informal interaction where ideas can be bounced around with little consequence – as opposed to the final stages of strategic commitment when things must necessarily be nailed down.

6

Volunteering and building the civic core

Where are we now?

Successive governments have invested significant funds in aspects of volunteering based on an assumption that a large ‘untapped resource’ of volunteers exists. The evidence to demonstrate that such a resource can be marshalled to engage in meaningful social action is open to question. Levels of volunteering have remained quite similar in the UK over the last two decades, although the composition of volunteers may have changed to some extent.^{19 20}



Academics now often use the term ‘civic core’ to describe the proportion of the population which contribute to social and community wellbeing through volunteering, participation in civic association and charitable giving. Few members of the population are completely disassociated from all three aspects (only about 15% of the population do not give any money to charity). But in terms of more intensive contributions, through volunteering, participation is lower.²¹ It is estimated by NCVO that about 41% of adults aged over 16 are involved in formal volunteering.²²

Why don't things always work out as planned?

Many public sector bodies, and particularly local authorities, are keen to increase levels of volunteering in their areas, but investment in promoting this activity does not always produce a dramatic increase in the number of volunteers.

Much of the impetus to engage in such intervention is underpinned by a general belief that voluntary social action contributes to the ‘social glue’, by bringing communities of place or interest together and producing social support, activity and cohesion. Sometimes motivations are more specific, such as to help produce and sustain a

¹⁹ NCVO (2017) *What the research tells us about volunteering*: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy/what-research-tells-us>

²⁰ NCVO (2017) https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac17/volunteering-overview/#Informal_volunteering.

²¹ See Mohan, J. and Bulloch, S. (2012) *The idea of a ‘civic core’*, Birmingham, TSRC Working Paper No 73, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-73.pdf>.

²² NCVO Almanac 2016, <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac17/volunteer-overview/>

voluntary workforce which can complement or even replace services provided by public sector bodies. Other examples may include the development of initiatives to facilitate or encourage public sector employees to engage in volunteering as part of, or in addition to, their paid roles.

The 'civic core' provides much of the volunteering time, but there are limits about how much this can grow. Routes to volunteering are well established. Indeed, Third Sector Trends data demonstrate conclusively that most people are drawn to volunteering along well-trodden paths. In North East England, 87% of TSOs agree or strongly agree that most of their volunteers arrive by 'word of mouth'; 43% say that they make a big effort to recruit volunteers, but only 17% rely on other organisations such as a CVS or volunteer centre to find volunteers.

What role should public sector authorities play in the process?

150,000 volunteers provide nearly 10m hours of work each year. The nominal financial cost of replacing such labour would be between £77m and £131m a year.

There is already a lot of volunteering going on in the North East of England. It is estimated that there are about 150,000 volunteers providing nearly 10 million hours of work each year. The nominal financial value given to replace such labour would be between £77m and £131m a year. While there is an upward trend, change in the volume of volunteering over time is quite limited - with estimates on the number of volunteers rising from 143,000 in 2008 to 149,000 in 2016.²³

So, while encouraging volunteering is clearly a good thing, it should be recognised that the outcome of such encouragement is likely to be the *maintenance* of current levels of volunteering rather than in dramatic growth in the volume of voluntary labour.

The Third Sector Trends Survey has found that TSOs value the contribution of volunteers enormously. Over 90% of small charities and groups state that they could not exist without the support of voluntarily given time, although this percentage falls to only 57% of the largest TSOs which tend to employ larger numbers of staff. But there are costs attached.

Indeed, 26% of the largest TSOs state that taking on volunteers often costs them more than the value they gain from them (compared with just 9% of the smallest charities and groups). Only 44% of the largest TSOs state that they rely mainly on volunteers who can work unsupervised compared with 78% of the smallest charities and groups.

Maintaining current levels of volunteering is vital, but it should be recognised that much of this will happen organically through the maintenance of well-trodden paths by charities and members of the civic core. Over-claiming the contribution of public sector-led (or business-led) initiatives to the volume and quality of volunteering is counterproductive and should be avoided. Time needs to be invested in recognising what's already likely to happen and understand why that will come about before making policies to produce more of it.

It also needs to be recognised that while TSOs are eager to harness the contribution volunteers make to help them do their work, there are limits. TSOs generally take on volunteers under specific circumstances to meet specific purposes. TSOs also realise that there are emotional, supervisory and economic costs attached to volunteers before weighing up whether to take on more of them.

Practicalities inevitably also come to mind. Most TSOs prefer to take on volunteers who provide regularised and continual contributions – although ephemeral events can also harness the work of occasional volunteers successfully too – such as in the staging of big events which need people to inform or safely to marshal audiences.

²³ *Third Sector Trends in North East England* (2016) *ibid.*, p. 20.

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

There are some areas of activity where volunteers cannot reasonably be expected to step in and undertake the work of employees. This may be because they are not motivated, are insufficiently skilled or do not have the necessary professional qualifications to do so. Indeed, charities involved in roles such as adult social care rely wholly on employed staff to undertake some roles because they need to exercise clear control over the delivery process which can only effectively be achieved in this way.

When contracts are let to charities to provide such services, therefore, it is not appropriate to make explicit or implicit assumptions that 'added value' can be exploited in specific areas of delivery. That said, many charities do add other kinds of value by establishing and maintaining, for example, volunteer led befriending services which can take some of the pressure off employed care workers.

Some groups of volunteers such as young people cannot be relied upon to give their time in a consistent and regularised way. School, college and university students provide a good resource of volunteers – but their contribution will be time limited and, given the pattern of their studies, will ebb and flow depending upon the other demands placed on them.

Similarly, when young adults start families, their energy or scope to engage in volunteering becomes more limited. So even committed and staunchly reliable young volunteers tend to step in and out of the civic core depending upon what else is happening in their lives.

Effective investment in volunteering often costs relatively little. But the loss of such investment can quickly unstitch practices which were working well. When networks of organisations are established, for example, facilitators can play a vital role in maintaining the personal links which keep people involved.

It is now well established in the academic literature that a balance needs to be struck between the 'altruistic' and 'instrumental' benefits of volunteering. Some people gain instrumental benefit by doing voluntary work which improves their skills and confidence which can be listed on their CVs. Others gain personal benefit, by building valuable and productive social connections while others gain by eroding a sense of loneliness or mitigating other pressures in their lives.

Some people who get involved in volunteering enjoy public recognition so public award ceremonies are valued while others, who make an equal contribution to their communities, may be uninterested in that but do need other forms of support in what they do. Investment, in short, may need to be distributed in a variety of ways to suit a range of purposes.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

Public sector bodies are often keen to collect evidence and communicate the levels of volunteering that exist in their areas of responsibility or influence. In some cases, public sector organisations seek to attach proxy financial values to such activity to show what would be lost if the volume of volunteering declined. Localised research work can be expensive and the quality of results drawn from such exercises is often open to question.

Given that generalised statistics are already available in the region on the 'replacement value' of volunteers from Third Sector Trends research, which are tracked over time, there may not be much point in additional studies unless such data are required by external funders.

Volunteer centres can provide valuable brokerage services to match volunteers with opportunities. But in our view, the scope for the achievement of such services should not be over stated. As shown above, most volunteers arrive at TSOs along well-trodden paths and many charities nurture and protect such sources of volunteers

Effective investment in volunteering often costs relatively little. But the loss of such investment can quickly unstitch practices which were working well.

carefully. The return on additional investment would, like as not, fall off quickly once the established or potential resource of the civic core has been exhausted.

On-line or published directories are often highlighted as successful ways of matching the supply of and demand for volunteers. Such directories go out of date fast and are expensive to maintain. Unless the efficacy of such directories can be demonstrated persuasively, we are not convinced that they are worth the investment.

Maintaining productive relationships that sustain volunteering is what counts. It doesn't sound very exciting, but it tends to work.

7

Building capacity in the voluntary sector

Where are we now?

Ten years ago, the then Labour Government published a Cabinet Office report on the future role of the third sector. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, in his preface to this consultation report said:

I believe that a successful modern democracy needs at its heart a thriving and diverse third sector. Government cannot and must not stifle or control the thousands of organisations and millions of people that make up this sector. Instead, *we must create the space and opportunity for it to flourish, we must be good partners when we work together and we must listen and respond...* the heart of our approach is our desire to support those thousands of small community organisations who play such a vital role in our society.²⁴

During the same period, David Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition, argued in the preface to the Conservative Party's Green Paper on the third sector that:

The time has come for us to think of the voluntary sector as the first sector... as the first place we should look for the answers that neither the state nor the market can provide. This is no pipe dream. The voluntary sector is already delivering change throughout the country... *The question is not whether the sector can do it, but what government can do to help them do more of it.*²⁵

And yet, as we observed in the first report from the Third Sector Trends study 'relatively little is known about the capacity and capability, let alone the willingness of the third sector to embrace government agendas. Indeed, the whole idea of defining a wide range of organisations (including charities, community and voluntary organisations, social enterprises, cooperatives, social and sporting clubs, faith groups, and so on) as a 'sector' at all remains contentious.'²⁶

However, after a decade of research by the authors we know a great deal more about the situation in the North East. Indeed, the region is the only area in the UK which has access to longitudinal research data on the changing structure and dynamics of the third sector.²⁷ Because we do, it is possible to judge with considerable confidence what the strengths and weaknesses of the sector are and in the context of this project explore with a sample of organisations and associated stakeholders what are the implications for the future development of inter-sector collaboration.

The first report from the Third Sector Trends Study, published in 2009, was concerned with the confidence, capacity and capability of the third sector. This was explored through qualitative research with the 29 principal infrastructure organisations in the region. At the time of writing in late 2017, only 15 of these organisations remained and most had become significantly smaller due to loss of income.

Indeed, for 14 of the remaining 15 organisations, for which financial information is available from the Charity Commission, decline in collective income continues. In 2012 income totalled £7.9m but in 2017 this had dropped to £5.8m – a 26% decline. While a

²⁴ Cabinet Office (2007) *The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration: final report*, London: HMSO, p.3.

²⁵ Conservative Party (2008) *A Stronger Society - Voluntary Action in the 21st Century*, London: Conservative Party Central Office, p. 4.

²⁶ Chapman, T. and Robinson, F. *et al.* (2009) *A Mosaic, Jigsaw or an Abstract? Getting a big picture perspective on the third sector in North East England and Cumbria*, Newcastle, Northern Rock Foundation.

²⁷ Longitudinal quantitative data are also available for analysis in Cumbria and to a lesser extent in Yorkshire and the Humber. Longitudinal qualitative data were collected in Cumbria only up until 2014.

small minority had fared well and increased or at least maintained income in the last five years, the income of the majority halved or more than halved.

Much of the capacity to support the third sector from within the public sector has also declined quite dramatically following the imposition of austerity policies by government since 2010. It is a mixed picture. Some local authorities have maintained only skeleton support for the third sector which amounts to little more than liaison work (but in some cases with no infrastructure organisation with which to liaise), whilst others have retained significant levels of capacity to work with the third sector and continue to invest in third sector infrastructure organisations to work on their behalf. Similarly, some health organisations invest substantially in local infrastructure support while others do not.

Sometimes, TSOs attended capacity building sessions because it might lead to something else – *funding* – and throughout the first decade of this century, it often did. TSOs are more selective now because they know that such opportunities are limited.

Why don't things always work out as planned?

Findings from this project suggest that things don't always work out as planned on the occasions when the public sector ask or demand that TSOs develop capability and capacity to achieve objectives that they are not interested in doing. Often, TSOs may sign up for consultation, networking, partnership, co-production, mentoring or training sessions - but it does not necessarily mean that they will change the way they plan or do things. Why, then, did they take part? Sometimes, they attended such sessions because it was felt that it might lead to something else – *funding* – and throughout the first decade of this century, it often did. TSOs are more selective now because they know that such opportunities are limited.

Much of the capacity building funding once garnered by infrastructure organisations to deliver capacity building work has now gone.²⁸ Questions remain, however, about the efficacy of previous investment in impact terms.²⁹ For example, very large sums of money were invested in TSOs so that they could develop capability, grow or work together in consortia to engage in public sector contracts. But such investment did not result in an increase in the percentage of TSOs doing such work between 2008 and 2016.³⁰

Similarly, while much was invested in volunteer programmes (as discussed in above in Section 6), the number of volunteers in North East England increased by less than 5 per cent between 2008 and 2018. It was noted in the Third Sector Trends Study that it was fashionable to invest in the capability of TSOs to avoid 'grant dependency', but the reality is that most TSOs perceive themselves to be equally or more dependent on grants now than they were in 2008.³¹

When considering organisational and sector capability, many aspects of development have been addressed through significant levels of investment – most of which have already been discussed in this report including: capability and capacity to deliver contracts; developing governance and leadership, volunteering, networking and consultation, partnership and co-production and impact assessment. Rather than returning to these issues, the next section draws on the findings of our project which addresses the general principles underlying the idea of building capacity and capability rather than the specifics which have already been discussed.

²⁸ Such sources of income came from, for example, the former Government Office, One North East, North East Assembly, as well as other direct funding from the European Union, government agencies (such as DCLG, Business Link, Connexions, Learning and Skills Councils) and the Big Lottery Fund.

²⁹ See, for example, Macmillan, R., Ellis Paine, A., Kara, H., Dayson, C., Sanderson, E. and Wells, P. (2014) *Building Capabilities in the Voluntary Sector: what the evidence tells us*, Birmingham, TSRC Working Paper number 125; Macmillan, R. (2013) 'Demand-led capacity building, the Big Lottery Fund and market-making in third sector support services', *Voluntary Sector Review* 9(4): 385-94.

³⁰ The percentage of TSOs delivering contracts increased from only 9.4% to 10.5% during this period, see Third Sector Trends in North East England 2016, p. 47.

³¹ Third Sector Trends 2016, *ibid*, pp. 30-31.

What role should public sector authorities play in the process?

We conclude that public sector demand-led investment (i.e. to get TSOs to do things that the public sector wants done) does not generally work very well. But this does not mean that we think all investment of this kind should stop. Instead, we think that when investment in building capability or capacity is to be made, it is necessary that the 'buyer' of that investment needs to be reassured that its recipients are 'serious' about change.

The first step is to make a reasonable assessment of how much interest there might be in taking up the capacity or capability building work. There is already good evidence from Third Sector Trends on the likely size of the marketplace for such interventions. It is known, for example, that there is huge demand from TSOs to improve their skills in fundraising, applying for grants or for contracts (amongst those who have an interest in the latter – which is limited).

Demand for developmental work, by contrast, in business planning or in financial, personnel, and strategic management is much more limited (even if these areas of development are, ultimately, more important to TSOs). Even if, as we have observed, 'money is not the answer to all of TSOs' problems', most TSOs nevertheless, feel that this is the case and generally put 'funding' ahead of other forms of development.³²

TSOs may not yet *know* that they need to change the way they do things, or worse, they may actively resist change which could benefit them.

What ambitions might realistically be achieved in the future?

Policy makers expecting public sector bodies to invest only in those TSOs which are 'ready to change' is difficult to enact for a number of reasons. Firstly, TSOs may not yet *know* that they need to change the way they do things, or worse, they may actively resist change which could benefit them. This means that before a programme is launched, a warm-up period is needed, to ensure that those TSOs which could benefit have been given time to think about it properly and also, perhaps, comment on the proposals before they are firmed up too much.

Secondly, TSOs may recognise that the capacity or capability programme, even if well intentioned and well designed, offers something which is impracticable or unpalatable for one reason or another.³³ Encouraging TSOs to take loans instead of grants is currently in vogue politically, but the interest in taking them amongst TSOs is extremely limited.³⁴

Investment in building interest in a capacity or capability programme is therefore important. This takes time. But once interest has been elicited, the next step is to devise 'stress tests' to be as sure as possible that TSOs are 'serious' about completing the programme and then acting upon what they have learned. Again, devising ways of doing this is hard work because there are few simple to use off-the-shelf diagnostic tools available.³⁵ Furthermore, it means that evaluative work has to extend beyond the life of the project – to see what difference it made when investment, help, encouragement and oversight has been withdrawn.

³² See: Chapman, T. (2017) 'Journeys and destinations: how third sector organisations navigate their future in turbulent times', *Voluntary Sector Review*, 8(1), 3-24; Chapman, T., Robinson, F. and Bell, V. (2013) *On the Money*, Newcastle, Northern Rock Foundation Third Sector Trends Study. <http://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/on-the-money-final.pdf>.

³³ An example of this is investment in 'social investment bonds'. While the institutional thinking around making loans to charities is well advanced, the benefits for TSOs, or the communities they serve, remain far from clear in most cases. See Chapman, T. (2017) 'The propensity of third sector organisations to borrow money in the UK', *Policy Studies*, 38(2), 185-204.

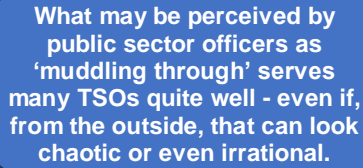
³⁴ Fewer than 3% of TSOs state that borrowed money is important to them and only 9% of Large TSOs are currently planning to borrow money in the next two years. Third Sector Trends (2016) *ibid.* p. 69.

³⁵ See, for example: Walton, C. and Macmillan, R. (2017) 'What's the problem? The role of diagnosis in building the capacity of voluntary and community organisations', *Voluntary Sector Review*, 6(3), 325-32.

When might it be better, purposefully, to do nothing?

Finally, we think it is important to reiterate a point made throughout this report: that public sector organisations should not try to shape TSOs in their own image. As we have shown, organisations in the third sector are different from those in the public sector in fundamental ways. What may appear to be sound arguments from a public sector perspective may be met with scepticism and suspicion from the third sector - and especially so if there is an intention to persuade TSOs to 'improve their practices' so that they fit with the values and processes of the public realm.

Many, in fact most, TSOs are not particularly interested in growing, becoming more professional, becoming more business-like or working for other organisations. What may be perceived as 'muddling through' serves many organisations quite well - even if, from the outside, that can look chaotic or even irrational.



What may be perceived by public sector officers as 'muddling through' serves many TSOs quite well - even if, from the outside, that can look chaotic or even irrational.

As the old maxim goes, 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. So, priority must be given to those organisations which want to change and are willing to accept help to let that happen. Demand-led initiatives are hard to do, but are probably more likely to succeed than supply-led programmes which try to cajole unwilling TSOs to change their ways.

8

Keeping things simple

In 2014, when the original *Keeping it Simple* report was published, we argued that in order to work effectively with the third sector it was always helpful to take a step back and look at the big picture. Before embarking on initiatives it is a good idea to pull away, momentarily at least, from pressing day to day issues that can take up so much time, resource and emotional energy. And by doing so it becomes apparent that:

- In working with the third sector the occurrence of big problems is quite rare – in general things work quite well and where they do not, remedies are usually at hand.
- Some issues surrounding collaboration can be alleviated quite easily, although the underlying issues might not go away completely.
- Sometimes problems will arise simply because people in the public sector and third sector do not share the same understanding of key terms.

Taking a step back from the day-to-day working relationships between the public sector and third sector, we argued, is not always easy. But using wide-ranging evidence helps to provide some social distance from which generalisations can be drawn.

In 2014, we offered some headline observations on what we thought local authorities need to think about. These thoughts were not prescriptive in strategic and procedural terms – but provided ways of ‘thinking about’ what is possible and desirable.

We also said in that research review that this was not our final word because we needed to test out the value of these ideas, as we now have done, with colleagues from the public sector, charitable foundations, third sector infrastructure bodies and, of course, TSOs which are engaged in the field.

What follows, therefore, is a revised and slightly expanded set of statements on what we think public sector officers need to do to ‘keep things simple’ and to allow them to ‘share’ rather than ‘assume’ responsibility’ for building effective and productive relationships with the third sector.

1 Get to know about the structure and dynamics of the third sector

Strategies which are based on ‘shared understanding’ are better than those which do not fully recognise, ignore or overlook different viewpoints. So the message from this report is that the public sector should avoid adopting or imposing views on what it feels the third sector *is* or *should be*. Keeping on top of the evidence is the best way of doing this.

The evidence base on third sector structure and dynamics is strong in North East England. The Third Sector Trends study provides a unique resource of longitudinal data which helps to show continuities and change in the sector and can provide explanations as to why change does or does not come about.

Localised intelligence is less convincing – partly because of lack of internal research and intelligence capacity in local authorities due to austerity measures but also because of the expense and lack of experience of some third sector infrastructure organisations tasked with the job of collecting such data which can be used comparably with other areas.³⁶

³⁶ Wilson, R., Cornford, J., Baines, S. and Mawson J. (2011) ‘Information for Localism? Policy Sense-making for Local Governance’, *Public Money and Management*, 31(4): 295-299.

Good evidence can be used effectively to confirm or challenge well-rehearsed narratives about what goes on inside the third sector and to explore those factors which make inter-sector relationships prosper or founder.

Now that the study has been extended right across the North of England, regional comparisons with Yorkshire and the Humber and North West England can be undertaken too. This will help us, in North East England, to consider why we do things differently from, or in similar ways to, other areas.

2 *Don't assume that TSOs will get behind your agendas.*

Many public sector organisations are keen to find ways of hearing clear and consistent views from the third sector and to have access to sector intelligence through 'one door'. This is a big ask and probably can never happen. As the third sector is diverse in its values, interests, practices and organisational forms, people in the third sector struggle to (or refuse to) speak with one voice.

The third sector is ambitious to achieve a lot – this requires resources of ideas, people and money. The way the sector works is shaped, to a large extent, by continual competition over scarce resources.

What the third sector is bound together by, is a commonly accepted set of ideas about how they differ from the way people operate in the public sector, private sector or private life (such as those private societies or clubs which serve their own interests rather than those of wider civil society).

From a public sector point of view, people in the third sector can often be conceived as 'troublesome' because they openly challenge ideas and decisions. Raising difficult questions is something the third sector does well - indeed, many people in the third sector feel that it exists to champion and sort out problems that other sectors have neglected, ignored or even caused.

So don't try, in other words, to shape the third sector in an image of your choosing. Because the third sector operates in the realm of civil society, they are free to do things their own way and have strong opinions on what the top priorities are for the people for whom they work. Some organisations and groups may well want to get behind your agendas (within limits). But many won't.

Don't try to shape the third sector in an image of your choosing. TSOs operate in the realm of civil society and are free to do things their own way. Some may want to get behind your agendas (within limits). But many won't.

3. *Always expect that things will take longer than you hoped*

Corporate management and planning is an important aspect of the work of public sector bodies. This takes time - and often much of the process is carried out internally so that plans are only revealed when the authority feels secure that proposals are coherent, practical and where appropriate carry the support of executive bodies and/or elected politicians.

Third sector organisations often complain, when they have been involved in consultation or the early stages of planning a new initiative, that it takes an age for public sector bodies to reach a decision; but once it is made, they want things done fast and there isn't then an opportunity for feedback and further dialogue. There is probably a good deal of truth in such assertions.

When plans involve changing attitudes and behaviours – as most do – a time lag between the point of enactment and getting people and organisations in the right frame of mind to achieve objectives is inevitable. When several TSOs are stakeholders in a new initiative, the process is more complex because some will align to plans more quickly than others.

Asset transfer provides a good example of why it takes a long time to achieve change.³⁷ It is not just a question of checking out that a business case is viable, ensuring a building is sound and reaching a legal agreement to effect change of ownership. Instead, it must be recognised that community groups or TSOs which may consider taking on such a responsibility have to embark on an organisational and cultural change leading to a difficult emotional journey – it is not just a matter of practicalities.

In policy or practice initiatives that require changes in attitudes and behaviour, rational and well thought-through arguments often don't, in short, cut the ice with the people and organisations they are aimed at. People must be ready to assimilate change and it always takes longer than you might think – but this is not *wasted time* if the result is as good as or better than you hoped for.

4. *If you hope to buy services from TSOs (but think you may need to help develop their capability first) be sure that they are serious about doing this work.*

When you are thinking about investing in the 'capability' or 'capacity' of the third sector to do the kind of work you need done – investment needs to be focused on those organisations which can demonstrate that they are serious about the need for change.

It is not a question of 'identifying' and investing in the kinds of organisations which *might* get behind your agendas but concentrating on those which can or are close to the position where they can.

If TSOs are serious about getting involved, they will submit themselves to 'stress tests' to assure you that they have the right organisational mindset to develop or even change the way they do things.

All too often in the past, TSOs which received capacity building or capability building grants find that nobody asked them to demonstrate how, in the long term, this investment improved their practices. So it is unclear whether the money was used wisely or not.

Similarly, it is not generally known whether those commissioned or tasked to provide capacity or capability building support contacted the right kinds of TSOs or whether their interventions actually made a difference or not.

If TSOs are serious, they will submit themselves to 'stress tests' to assure you that they have the right organisational mindset to develop or even change the way they do things. And as a requirement of investment, they will need to be prepared to show (and be 'interested' in finding out about) what the longer term impacts of that investment have been.

Don't invest in the capacity or capability of organisations to deliver services and contracts if you have a different purpose in mind. If you want to invest in aspects of community wellbeing more generally, through small grants, asset transfer, or organisational support be clear about the purposes you want this investment to serve and recognise that the way of measuring success is likely to be different from service delivery contracts.

5. *Involving the third sector in strategic thinking and commissioning can be advantageous if the right approach is taken.*

The right approach is to think carefully about which organisations or groups are included or *excluded* at the appropriate phases of the commissioning cycle.

- If you are seeking understanding about the needs and priorities of communities – many TSOs may need to be involved, not just one or two of your own preferred organisations.

³⁷ See Robinson, F., Zass-Ogilvie, I., Elliott, G. and Jefferson, D. (2015) *Assets or Liabilities: sustaining community buildings in County Durham*, Durham, Policy&Practice, St Chad's College, Durham University.

- When discussing the technicalities of achieving the objectives of interventions, those organisations with more specialist knowledge may need to be included.
- When procurement processes begin, some organisations may need to be excluded from procedural discussion if it is obvious that their involvement in such deliberation may benefit them in some way.
- At the point of contracting, some organisations might justifiably be excluded in a filtering process prior to a full tender submission if it is evident that they don't have the capability to deliver.

Operating in an inclusive way is good when appropriate, but counter-productive when it is not.

6. *Communicate with the third sector in a timely way about strategic priorities that may affect them*

It is not your responsibility to broker partnerships or build trust and confidence amongst TSOs: it is *their* responsibility. But they can do that more effectively when they can anticipate opportunities.

If there is a possibility that contracts may be let, it is better to flag them up (without making firm promises) so that individual or groups of TSOs can start to plan how they might work together to tackle such a contract successfully.

When the third sector is given too little time to prepare, especially if partnership working is required, it can produce complaint and often poor quality tenders. If partnerships are weak at the outset, the chances of them achieving objectives when tenders are won are reduced.

It is not, however, your responsibility to broker partnerships or build trust and confidence amongst TSOs: this is their responsibility – but they can do that more effectively if they can anticipate opportunities.

7. *Spending money is not always the answer, often it is the cause of problems*

New initiatives always have costs attached to them. People in the third sector know this and are often attracted by news about potential initiatives that might attract investment from one source or another. TSOs are adept at aligning with new initiatives even if, on the surface, the connection is not immediately apparent. When an area announces an intention to bid for, say, the 'City of Culture', it can be expected that many TSOs will be thinking hard about how they can capitalise on this.

Often this is clearly justified and the connection is entirely transparent. For example, TSOs which have a track record in running arts, heritage and culture projects would be expected to get involved. Others may emerge in less obvious, but no less plausible ways. Mental health charities, for example, may have been using therapeutic arts projects for years, but may not have made much of it in the way they promote their work until such an opportunity arises. Youth organisations, similarly, may realign the way they present their work by referencing their existing volunteering projects that connect with arts and heritage. Others may emerge in much more unexpected ways.

It would be wrong to assert that these new alignments are purely opportunistic (although there may be an element of that). Instead, they may inject real energy into the initiative and produce interactions and linkages which had previously been unrecognised or did not exist at all.

Money can cause problems too if the purpose for its provision is not clear or if the process of its allocation creates resentment. In this programme of work we have found good initiatives with none or precious little money on the table, but instead have offered some in-kind support to facilitate new connections between TSOs which result in the evolution of interesting and effective new approaches to practice.

It might be better, sometimes, to let money follow developments that have already started to work well rather than to invest too much too soon in new initiatives.

8. When framing the objectives of contracts or grants - be clear about what the impact could be

Contributing to social wellbeing in the community is a valuable outcome which is hard to measure when it is there, but easy to measure when it's gone.

Recognise that maintaining social wellbeing through *small investments* in TSOs can produce a great deal of benefit for communities and strengthen the social glue without necessarily achieving radical change. Contributing to social wellbeing in the community is a valuable outcome which is hard to measure when it is there, but easy to measure when it's gone.

Know when '*transformational change*' is possible and when it isn't. Usually TSOs are paid to provide worthwhile services for people that help them, their families and communities to get on with their lives reasonably successfully. Changing behaviours in a fundamental way is a big ask – so be careful before you ask for that.

If you demand that TSOs offer '*innovative approaches*', ask yourself first why that might be of benefit. Often, innovation is unnecessary – it's getting the job done well, based on understanding, experience and established and skilful practices that counts. The best forms of innovation often arise from the way that a group of organisations bring more benefit through their collective (but often relatively autonomous) efforts - rather than from discrete aspects of innovative practice.

Don't devise unreasonable or unachievable clauses. For example, don't ask TSOs to explain how their project or service can become '*sustainable*' after your grant or contract has ended if there is little or no prospect of that being possible. Make demands for TSOs to achieve '*match funding*' judiciously and only when it is known that it is feasible.

If you use terms like '*added value*', ask yourselves whether this is possible, reasonable or measurable. In other words, don't ask people to do things they can't be expected to achieve with the resources they have to hand, or worse, to do things that can't be achieved at all. If you do, it is a recipe for disappointment all round. It's a misnomer to think that volunteers can always fill the gap when resources are tight in TSOs. Sometimes volunteers *consume* more resource than they produce. And there are some tasks that volunteers won't do or can't do because they lack the motivation or expertise.

If you want TSOs to achieve specific objectives with the most *socially excluded* members of the community, it must be recognised that the marginal costs are significantly higher than for people who are ready to achieve the objectives you have set. If objectives are unrealistic and unachievable then contracts are fundamentally flawed. Just because TSOs say they are close to their communities it does not mean that they can reach, engage and help people that your organisation (or a private sector organisation) cannot do much for with the same resources at hand.

9. Be clear about the decisions you make on things you don't want to lend support to.

Just over a third of the financial resources in the third sector come from the public purse (and quite a lot less than that from local authorities). So you are neither fully responsible for the maintenance of the whole sector nor the full range of beneficiaries it seeks to serve.

Communicate what the purposes of your strategic investments are at the outset and be sure to distinguish between different types of investment. Make sure the process of assessing applications is clear and stick to the rules firmly. And ensure that the outcomes of investment programmes are communicated widely and fully so that everyone knows where they stand – even if some TSOs are disappointed by the outcome.

Make it clear when you do not intend to invest in certain activities but make some provision to signpost TSOs to other sources of income which may be available to them. This does not necessarily mean that the research and intelligence underpinning the signposting of other funding bodies needs always to happen at the local level – there are many useful sources of such information available elsewhere. But it may be the case that some support needs to be given to those organisations that do not know how to go about the process of applying for such funds.

10. You don't always have to be in charge

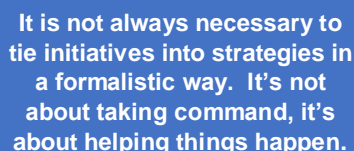
Since 2014 when our first set of tentative recommendations was published, a lot has happened. Local authorities have had to accommodate further to severe cuts in income due to government's sustained austerity policies. Health bodies have seen patient demand rising fast, putting enormous pressure on services. There isn't that much money or time available for new initiatives.

There's a good side to this. Public sector organisations have had to become more selective and more creative in the way that they approach existing or new priorities. A lot of thought has and is being given to new ways of working with diminished resources to achieve desired outcomes.

Much of the best work we have observed has focused on preventative measures to alleviate the pressure of demand on public authorities. Some initiatives work on a very small scale, such as working with charities to raise funds to provide vulnerable hospital patients or care home residents with non-slip footwear – so diminishing the distress and pain caused by falls and the cost of treatment and recovery. Initiatives such as these don't rely on strategic initiatives – they rely on building good relationships and spotting where something small can make a big difference. Taken together, small initiatives really can make a big difference.

At a strategic level, the focus is generally on the bigger picture – and public authorities rightly assume responsibility for this. The third sector can rarely achieve the impartiality required because interests are so varied and commitment to them so strong. This does not mean, however, that valuable perspectives cannot be given on strategic matters; in taking into account these valuable insights, however, it is necessary to take note of the position of interest from which they have come.

But we argue that at the micro and middle range of activity – it is not always necessary to tie initiatives in to such strategies in formalistic ways. It's better to be appreciative of them and help more of them to emerge. Getting the message out that something has made a difference is the important thing so that others can adapt or copy the idea elsewhere. It's not about taking command, it's about helping things happen.



It is not always necessary to tie initiatives into strategies in a formalistic way. It's not about taking command, it's about helping things happen.

Keeping it simple could be easier than you'd expect

The above suggestions on how to work effectively with the third sector are offered with the best intentions. We hope that what we say will help people in public sector bodies, at all levels, to think carefully about what they want to achieve when working with the third sector. We have tried hard not to offer advice that simply can't be acted upon – but instead have worked out some ways of thinking about relationships that we hope will chime with aspects of current experience.

Keeping things simple would, arguably, be easier if it was entirely up to public sector bodies to get on with the job. But of course that can't happen either. Political factors will come into play which will affect plans. We are witnessing the increasingly fragmented nature of the public realm, set alongside austerity, and the complex cross-cutting nature of policy challenges, leading to pressures for devolution, outsourcing and the engagement of the third sector in service delivery.

Occasionally the impetus for political change may come from pressures exerted by the third sector itself. But such pressures need to be kept in proportion – the day to day practices of working successfully with the third sector will not change that dramatically in response to most political interventions.

Radically changing the way public sector organisations do things doesn't always come easily or quickly – especially if it involves changing the way that people think. But actually, most of what we have said is about the way that people think and act now – it's just that this thinking sometimes gets clouded or moved aside by immediate pressures or problems.

Keeping things simple could be easier than might be expected.

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APPENDIX 1: Participants

Local Authorities

Mark Adams, Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
Charlotte Burnham, Sunderland City Council
Gordon Elliott, Durham County Council
Laurayne Featherstone, Stockton Borough Council³⁸
Kirsten Francis, Northumberland County Council
Natasha Telfer, Darlington Borough Council³⁹
Linda Whitfield, Gateshead Council

Health Organisations

Julie Bailey, NHS South Tees CCG
Andrew Copland, NHS Hartlepool and Stockton CCG
Sarah Perkins, Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust
James Duncan, Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust
Paul Watkins, South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Charitable Foundations

Julie Coxon, Big Lottery Fund
Nikki Crowther, Ballinger Charitable Trust
Harriet Stranks, Lloyds Bank Foundation
Clare Wilkinson, Garfield Weston
Clare Watkin, Big Lottery Fund
Rob Williamson, Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland

Third Sector Organisations

Julia Bracknall, Carers Together
Alistair Cameron, Launchpad and ReCoCo
Mark Davis, Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency
Jane Hartley, Voluntary Organisations' Network North East
Brendan Hill, Concern, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Group
Gillian Peel, Age UK North Yorkshire and Darlington
Sally Young, Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service

Researchers

Tony Chapman, St Chad's College, Durham University
John Mawson, Institute for Local Governance, Durham University
Fred Robinson, St Chad's College, Durham University
Jonathan Wistow, Department of Sociology, Durham University

³⁸ Seconded to Catalyst in 2016

³⁹ Mary Hall was our initial contact in the Council, but on her retirement was replaced by Natasha mid-way through the programme.

APPENDIX 2: Research evidence

The ESRC funded *Keeping it Simple* and *Sharing the Responsibility* projects were commissioned under an Impact Acceleration Award scheme which is managed by Durham University. As such, the projects were devised to capitalise upon existing research material which had been generated primarily by the authors of this report (detailed below).

Evidence gained from the current project

The two projects involved consultation work with agencies and organisations across the region. In addition to 8 half-day meetings with groups of participants from the projects, we also undertook private meetings with stakeholders from each of the local authorities and health authorities.

Events and meetings were attended across the region on related issues in all of the local authority areas under scrutiny. Examples included the presentation of findings at a number of local authority managed partnership boards, at seminars and conferences run by VONNE and IPPR and at charitable foundations' AGMs, amongst other things.

As the project progressed, a number of seminars were run across the region to test ideas. These seminars were incorporated into the ILG's annual series of events and brought in more than 750 participants from across the region in the public sector, private sector, third sector and academia. The topics under consideration to explore multi-sector interactions included: *asset transfer of council properties; provision of support for carers; co-production in the delivery of public services; the influence of demographic change on public sector priorities; preventative measure to alleviate social problems; tackling social problems in rural areas; building the civic core through volunteering; youth skills and life transitions; tackling deprivation in coastal communities; graduate retention in North East England; and, the role of arts and heritage organisations in the economic and social regeneration of the region.*

Part of the consultation process involved in-depth interviews with 40 Third Sector Organisations from across the region undertaken by Fred Robinson and Tony Chapman. These interviews were undertaken with guarantees of confidentiality given the sensitive nature of the discussions and the potential to undermine the position of participants' organisations when seeking grants or contracts from public authorities or philanthropic organisations.

Most (35 of 40) of the TSOs involved had previously been engaged in a qualitative element of the Third Sector Trends study, the TSO50. This is a longitudinal research project which began in 2008. Consequently, we had access to unprecedented depth of evidence upon which to draw.

While we cannot list the organisations involved for ethical reasons, we can confirm that they represented a broad sample of organisation by size, practice preferences, legal form and spatial coverage across the region. Due to the focus on interactions with public sector organisations – the majority of participants ran TSOs with income above £250,000 per annum, although a limited number of smaller TSOs were retained from the TSO50 to gain a range of viewpoints. TSOs' interests were focused on four principal areas of benefit: mental health, young people, older people and arts and heritage.

Evidence drawn from other ILG projects

For the *Institute for Local Governance*, several interrelated, but separate research projects on third sector and public sector relationships have been undertaken.

In 2016-17 Fred Robinson worked with Keith Shaw and Sue Regan of Northumbria University on a major study of governance in the North East of England. The findings of *Who runs the North East Now?* were published in 2017.⁴⁰ This work was funded by the ILG, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Muckle LLP. The researchers looked at the region's political structures and the local Councils, bodies and boards running key public services. The research covered 100 organisations in local government, health, education, arts and culture and housing.

From 2016-18 Tony Chapman has been leading a study for Durham County Council on the provision of support for young people in the County to make successful youth transitions. The study aims to garner evidence on the strength of relationships within and amongst organisations which provide services to young people across the education, public sector, private sector and third sector. The study has drawn on ideas developed in the Keeping it Simple and Sharing the Responsibility projects, and is testing them in the context of one area of beneficiary need.⁴¹

In 2012 and 2013 a study was carried out by Tony Chapman and John Mawson for Northumberland County Council to examine the strategies to produce a conducive environment for the development of socially enterprising activity and promote social growth. This resulted in the production of a county-wide *Manifesto for Social Enterprise in Northumberland*.⁴²

Fred Robinson and Ian Zass-Ogilvie undertook a study for Durham County Council on its asset transfer programme, *Durham Ask*, which commenced in 2012 and was completed in 2016. The programme resulted in the successful transfer of many former Council run community centres⁴³

In 2012-13, a project was undertaken for Stockton-on-Tees Council by Tony Chapman to explore ways of assessing the value of investment by the Council on the third sector.

These four studies based in County Durham, Stockton-on-Tees and Northumberland explored complementary issues, making it possible to test ideas in similar and different contexts.

Tony Chapman also led a study for the ILG on the role of place-based budgeting (previously known as Total Place) in 2011. This study explored the importance of collaborative governance and partnership working in the delivery of integrated services. The research involved content analysis of evaluation reports from 20 Total Place initiatives and concluded with a seminar for TSO and public sector officers.⁴⁴

Aligned to these studies, Tony Chapman undertook a substantive review of public sector / third sector relationships in Sunderland for the City Council in 2014.

⁴⁰ Available at this address: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/publications/>

⁴¹ Available at this address: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/research-news/building-employability-young-people-county-durham/>

⁴² Available at this address: http://www.scatastocksfeld.co.uk/app/assets/files/documents/social_manifesto_v6.pdf

⁴³ Available at this address: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Assets-or-Liabilities-ILG-Report-April-2015.pdf>

⁴⁴ Available at this address: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/current-and-recent-research-projects/taking-forward-total-place-engaging-the-third-sector-in-service-delivery/>

Evidence from projects funded by other bodies

Third Sector Trends Study. This ten-year study has produced insights on sector relationships in a changing social, political and economic environment in North East England and Cumbria. The study was initially funded by Northern Rock Foundation but is now supported by Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland.⁴⁵

In addition to qualitative research, the study has included major quantitative surveys of the sector in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. In 2016 the study was extended across the whole of Northern England and yielded more than 3,500 responses. The study was jointly funded by Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Garfield Weston/IPPR North.

For *Charity Bank* and *Northern Rock Foundation*, a study was Commissioned on the propensity of TSOs to borrow money across the North East and Cumbria and Yorkshire and the Humber. The final report and subsequent academic articles provide the only large-scale assessment of Third Sector interest in loan finance.⁴⁶

For *One North East*, the former Regional Development Agency, a study of public sector and TSO relationships in Tees Valley was undertaken in 2008. This involved a series of seminars with public sector and third sector participants from across the Tees Valley. The study explored internal and external perceptions of sector strengths and weaknesses. It produced new insights on the cultural conditions under which collaborative governance can operate successfully.⁴⁷

For *Garfield Weston Foundation*. A study of the situation of the third sector in North East England by Cathy Pharoah of the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy and Tony Chapman. The study, carried out in 2013-14 was particularly concerned with the role of non-statutory funding for TSOs arriving from charitable foundations and provided valuable insights on the shifting balance between statutory and charitable foundation funding to the third sector.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Full access to reports from the Third Sector Trends study in North East England and Cumbria is available at this address: . <http://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/knowledge-and-leadership/third-sector-trends-research/> Reports from Yorkshire and the Humber and North West England are available here: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/category/research/research-news/page/2/>

⁴⁶ Available at this address: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/current-and-recent-research-projects/charity-bank-commissions-study-on-borrowing-in-cumbria/>, see also: Chapman, T. (2017) 'The propensity of third sector organisations to borrow money in the UK', *Policy Studies*, 38(2), 185-204.

⁴⁷ See: Chapman, T., Brown, J., Ford, C. and Baxter, E. (2010) 'Trouble with champions: local public sector – third sector partnerships and the future prospects for collaborative governance in the UK', *Policy Studies*, 30(6), 613-630.

⁴⁸ Pharoah, C., Chapman, T. and Choudhury, R. (2014) *An insight into charity funding in the North East*, London: Garfield Weston Foundation.



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